

WHAT ARE PEOPLE FOR?
May 18, 2008

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 8
Genesis 1:1-5, 24-28a
Matthew 28:16-20

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them?"
Psalm 8:4 (NRSV)

Nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured.
But there is always a chance for conversion—a chance for people to believe
that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle. . . . Nihilism is
not overcome
by arguments or self-analysis: it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of
the soul
must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through
one's own affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern
of others.

A love ethic must be at the center of the politics of conversion.

Cornel West
Race Matters

*The United Church of Christ (UCC), a denomination very much like our
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and one congregation of which is Trinity
United Church of Christ here in Chicago, has asked all of its congregations
—and others—to join today in a "Sacred Conversation" about the topic of
race. The President of the UCC, John Thomas, issued the invitation in
response to the controversy swirling around Trinity Church and comments
made by its pastor, Jeremiah Wright, which many thought were
inappropriate and inflammatory.*

*And so this morning, a conversation about race, on the text "What are
human beings that you are mindful of them?" (Psalm 8:4).*

*You have created all of us, O God, and placed deep within each of us your
image.
You have made all of us—nations, races, men and women—in your image
and*

*blessed us with responsibility. We thank you for that gift. And we ask you
now
to open our minds and our hearts to your life-giving, liberating love, which
you
have shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ your Son, our
Lord. Amen.*

Cornel West is Professor of Religion and African American studies at Princeton University and a widely respected scholar. He introduces his book *Race Matters* by telling about one of the biweekly treks his wife and he make to New York City from Princeton. In the car, he was feeling good about the two lectures he had delivered that day, one of them on Plato's *Republic*. He and his wife both had appointments in Manhattan. His was to have a picture taken for his most recent book. It was raining. He dropped her off on 60th Street, between Lexington and Park Avenue, parked his car, stood on the curb, and raised his hand to hail a taxi. An empty cab passed by, then another; a third and fourth cab sailed by. Now wet and becoming angry, he watched as a tenth cab passed him and stopped for a well-dressed woman of European descent. She knew exactly what was happening: as she stepped into the cab, she said, "This is really ridiculous, isn't it?"

When he was driving up to Williams College to teach one time he was pulled over and accused of trafficking cocaine. When he told the police officer that he was a professor of religion at Princeton, the officer replied, "Yeah, and I'm the Flying Nun. Let's go, nigger!" West remembers being stopped by police three times in his first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly on a residential street. The same things have happened to his son Clifton, to whom West has dedicated the book. And if we listen we will learn that those kinds of things happen daily to racial minorities in this country.

When we think about race, civil rights, racial justice, and equality, about how much progress we have made—and we have made great progress—about how much better things are—and they are much better—we need also to think about how deep racism is and how profound and how complex.

"The fundamental crisis in black America," Cornel West says, "is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love" (p. 13). The big problem is not oppression nor exploitation, but nihilism, which West defines as the loss of hope and the absence of meaning and love (p.15). It's a spiritual matter, a matter of soul. It will be overcome by an affirmation of self-worth—in the face of a lot of evidence that you're not worth anything. It will happen, West says, remembering his own history in the black church and the critical role the church played and still plays in the all-important life-giving matter of affirming self-worth—it will happen when people understand that they are valuable, that their lives are valuable, that they are loved. That's a spiritual matter, a conversion from self-hatred to self-love.

Years ago when ambitious young ministers used to bring youth groups to Chicago for the weekend to see the big city, visit churches, see all the outreach programs, walk along West Madison, which used to be Chicago's infamous skid row, one of the "must" stops on those trips was Operation Bread Basket, which is what Operation PUSH used to be called. I'll never forget the crowded theater on the South Side, early Saturday morning, a sea of black faces, and my little youth group of white teenagers from Lafayette, Indiana. The proceedings began after some rousing gospel music when the leader, it might have been a young Jesse Jackson, stood up and shouted into the microphone, "I!" The crowd stood and shouted back "I!" "Am!" he shouted. "Am!" the crowd responded. "Somebody!" "Somebody!" "I am somebody!" What an experience. My young people and I were amazed and impressed. We didn't have a ritual like that in our church. We've been told that we are somebody—that we matter, that we have value—in one way or another by parents, families, by the structure of our society, which provided for our education, health, security, and safety, every day of our lives. Obviously something very important was happening: an affirmation of self-worth, being, identity—a conversion from the nihilism all around—and it was happening in what felt like a church and was unapologetically Christian.

There is on the very first page of the Bible, Genesis 1, a revolutionary idea. It is that human beings are endowed with dignity and worth; human beings are created in the image of God. Notice, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says,

that of all the creatures God creates, God speaks only to the human creature. Notice that human beings alone are free to respond to God. Notice that human beings are created in God's own image, male and female, and then given power—and responsibility—"dominion" the Bible calls it. Notice that the men and women are not chattel, or servants of God—but agents, to whom much is given and much expected.
(*Interpretation*, "Genesis," pp. 31-33)

On the first page, the central Biblical notion: God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Psalm 8 echoes,

When I look at your heavens,
the moon, the stars;
what are human beings?
Yet you made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.

The Bible holds a very high view of human beings, our value, our promise and potential. Dignity, honor, and responsibility.

Black liberation theology has been much in the news recently due in part to the Reverend Jeremiah Wright's statements. Liberation theology emerged as a major force in religion in the 1960s. It is based on the biblical idea of the value and dignity and promise of every human being and the idea that God wants every human being to be free of everything that denies or denigrates their humanity. In South and Central America, Roman Catholic priests and theologians started to advocate for the rights of the poor and to criticize governments that were kept in power and businesses that profited from making sure the poor remained poor and powerless. Sometimes they even demonstrated and organized, and it all felt very threatening to the powers that be. Talk about political rights—economic justice, fair wages, unions—seemed to threaten the established order and were regarded as subversive. The Vatican frowned on liberation theology; still does for that matter. Governments cracked down: troublemakers were imprisoned or disappeared; nuns, priests were killed. Archbishop Oscar Romero, one of the most outspoken and eloquent proponents of liberation theology in El Salvador, was murdered at the altar of his cathedral.

In this country, liberation theology found expression in the civil rights movement. It was taught and championed by James Cone at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In a recent interview, Cone remembered when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. His church-based, nonviolent approach to civil rights suffered a serious blow and was questioned by black leaders. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam were dismissing Christianity as "The White Man's Religion," weak, compliant." The question Cone remembers among black intelligentsia was simply, "Can I be black and a Christian?" Absolutely, he concluded. But it would require a new approach, based, for instance, on Genesis 1—we are given dominion by God—and Psalm 8—we are created a little lower than God, all of us, white-black, rich-poor, underprivileged-privileged, male-female, young-old, gay-straight, crowned with dignity and honor. It would involve recovering the theme of freedom in the Bible: the story of God hearing the groans of the children of Israel in bondage in Egypt, God sending Moses, a liberator, to lead them out of slavery. It would involve remembering that Jesus introduced his ministry in the Nazareth synagogue by quoting from the Prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;
he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives and
recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

Cone said liberation theology is simply a matter of connecting the dots between the biblical themes of freedom and the situation in which African American people found themselves in slavery and segregation and in a society that in so many ways continued to deny their humanity and their value.

I suspect I'm not the only one who would be grateful if the Jeremiah Wright-Trinity United Church of Christ matter would recede from the news—for many reasons, chief among them that the good people of Trinity Church could resume being the wonderfully faithful church of Jesus Christ they became under Jeremiah Wright's leadership and now under the dynamic preaching and leadership of their new pastor, Otis Moss III. The congregation has been deluged with media attention. Reporters and TV cameras descended and were there around the clock. Reporters telephoned church members on the church's hospital prayer list to try to get them to talk and say something critical about their pastor. There have been death threats and the need for enhanced security. Wright himself has kept it going by some things he said in front of the NAACP and the National Press Club.

I heard Teresa Hord Owens speak about the whole matter this week on a panel with Martin Marty. Terry is Dean of Students at the University of Chicago Divinity School, an African American woman who left a career in information technology with Ernst and Young to go to seminary; now she is the dean. She is also a member of Salem Baptist Church, a congregation very much like Trinity. She knows and respects Jeremiah Wright. Terry expressed her disappointment at some of the things Wright said and repeated and concluded that he is not helping but muddying the water in the nation's conversation about race. But, Terry said, reflecting my sentiments exactly, it is a good thing a particularly ill-chosen sentence or two was not lifted from one of her sermons, or one of mine, and replayed on TV over and over. With our suspicion of too much ecclesiastical power and authority, we Protestants, black and white, know that on any given Sunday morning a lot of silly things are said from the pulpits of the land and church members themselves know how to filter out the silliness, forgive the over-the-top statements, the ones with which they profoundly disagree, and consider the whole of the minister's ministry. And that, Dr. Owens said—the whole picture in the case of Jeremiah Wright and Trinity Church—is about self-affirmation, the naming and affirming and expressing and supporting of the God-given dignity and worth of every human being. That ministry of liberation happens at Trinity Church in employment programs and economic development to help small businesses, family support and child care—education and parenting skills, health—HIV/AIDS programs, cooking classes, “how to take charge of your life” classes, with a special and intentional emphasis on African American men and fathers and their responsibility, exercising God-given dominion as human beings bearing within the very image of God.

Human dignity and honor and God-given responsibility is a racial issue because of our history: of slavery and Jim Crow laws and segregation, separate but unequal schools—a problem we still haven't figured out how to solve—but it transcends race and is a human issue finally.

Farmer/poet Wendell Berry has written a book of essays, *What Are People For?* and argues that it is the most important question of all—politically, socially, economically, theologically. There is a chilling paragraph in David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*. He is describing the process by which Communist China decided to enter the war on the side of the North Koreans and the warnings from top Chinese generals that the cost could be very high, perhaps even a nuclear attack by American forces. Halberstam writes, "Mao Tse-Tung, the Chinese dictator, was . . . emotionally immune to the loss of life." It was simply the price that had to be paid. China had millions of people and was on its way to greatness; it could sacrifice far more of them than other countries. "The death of ten or twenty million people is nothing to be afraid of," Mao Tse-Tung said (p. 355).

Over against the idea that human life is cheap, that human beings are expendable, there is a truly revolutionary alternative: namely that every one of those 10 or 20 million people is a human being, created in the image of God, given by the Creator dignity, honor, glory, and responsibility. No one, not one, is expendable. Each is precious, a being of infinite value.

We Christians have been far more eloquent describing what's wrong with human beings than what is right and hopeful. We know more about sin than human potential. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall writes, "The critical dimension is only one side of the matter. The other is that as creatures of God, human beings are beings of astonishing promise and beauty who are by no means forbidden to wonder and rejoice in their own being" (*Professing the Faith*, p. 212).

We believe that every human being—black, brown, yellow, white, and everything in between—every individual human being is created in the image of God. Each one has dignity, honor, and glory—and responsibility. Furthermore, we believe that in Jesus Christ we have seen the extent and power of God's love for each in his death, the passion of God for God's creatures—the ones to whom God spoke and to whom God gave dominion.

Every child —every child of God—needs to know that he or she is intended, valued, loved by God, that he or she bears within the very image of God.

When I look at your heavens,
the moon, the stars;

what are human beings?
Yet you made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.

That's you we're talking about—and me. All of us. Thanks be to God.